

SWEET BRIAR COLLEGE



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Indiana Fletcher Williams
of
Sweet Briar



by

Ann Marshall Whitley '47

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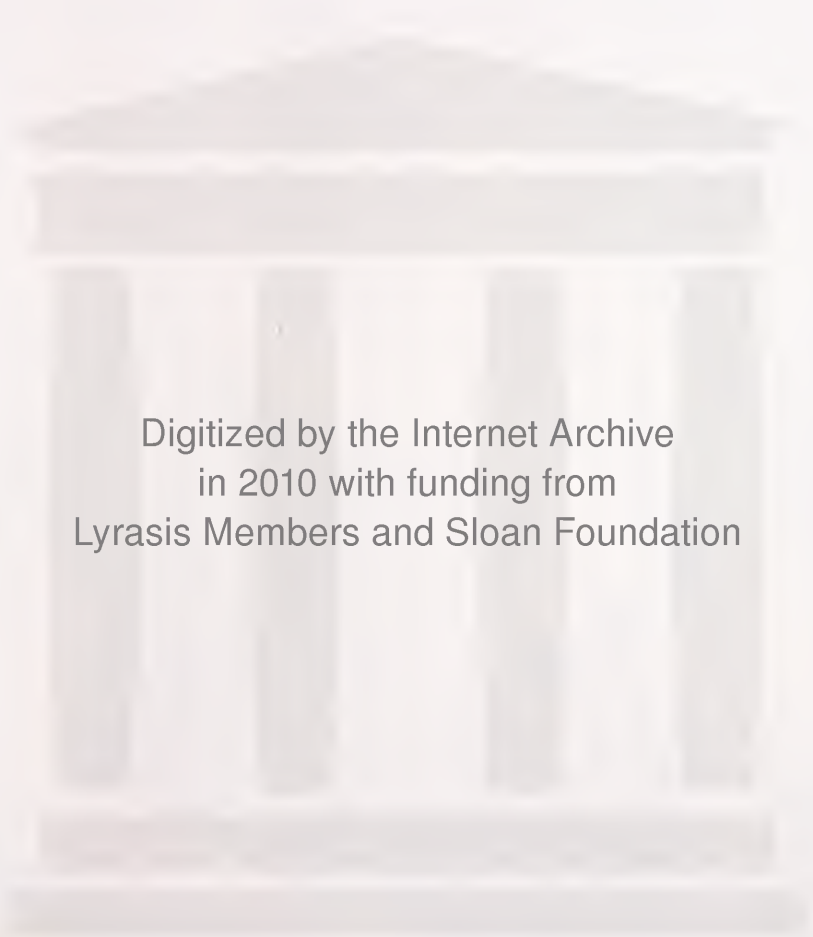
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Indiana Fletcher Williams — c. 1875



Preface

In the early 1980s while serving on the board of the Amherst County, Virginia, Historical Museum, and while establishing the Sweet Briar College Museum, I was shown an old, expandable, rodent-chewed, laundry case held together with a worn webbed strap. The case, located on the bottom shelf of a metal bookcase, was in a dark and airless storage room and hidden behind a desk in the Amherst County Court House.

Sherrie Snead McLeroy, Director of the Amherst County Historical Museum, told me that the "Sweet Briar Box" contained all of the records of the 1900-1901 court hearings in the attempt to break the will of Indiana Fletcher Williams — the will which founded Sweet Briar College.

The suits were brought against her estate by the remaining children of Indiana's brother, Lucian Fletcher, the State of Virginia, and the County of Amherst. The children considered themselves their aunt's heirs, and the state and county wanted their back taxes, which had not been paid since the end of the Civil War.

From the day of her marriage Indiana considered herself to be a northerner and from that day forward she refused to pay any taxes to either the State of Virginia or to the County of Amherst. Collection of taxes in the South after the war was nearly futile as so few people had any money to pay them. As far as Indiana was concerned, any money paid in taxes to Virginia would only help support the terrible corruption of Reconstruction in the southern states.

The papers had never been researched, and it was possible that they might throw some light on the shadowy figure of Indiana Williams through depositions and testimony from her contemporary friends, neighbors, and business associates.

In the ensuing years, I often thought of the old laundry case, and in 1989, a court order was obtained to remove it to the Sweet Briar Library for a short period of time. The contents were copied, and



page by page over the following year, I was able to bring more clearly into focus the persona of Indiana Fletcher Williams.

Much material in the following pages comes from the depositions at the hearings; from the *Edited Letters of Elijah Fletcher*, compiled by Martha von Briesen, *Daisy's Diary*, compiled by Margaret Bannister; *The Story of Sweet Briar*, by Martha Lou Stolman, *The Crawford Genealogy*, compiled by Robert Crawford; the *Journal of Elizabeth Payne*, loaned to me by her granddaughter, Elizabeth Eskridge Ambler; and certain other materials found in the archival material in the Sweet Briar Library.

It is the hope of this writer that the long shadowy figure of Indiana Williams has been given a little more substance.

— *Ann Marshall Whitley* '47



Introduction

*I*t was nearly dinner time and six o'clock. Mrs. Camilla Farrar, who rented the little cottage in the yard nestled close to the Sweet Briar House, had not seen Miss Indie all afternoon. Robert Rucker, who cooked her meals and generally looked after the house, would not return until tomorrow as he was sowing seed with other workers in the far wheat fields of the plantation.

Surely Miss Indie should have come outside at least once in the afternoon to draw water from the well. Mrs. Farrar thought it was much too quiet in the house, so she climbed the steps to the back porch and let herself in calling Indiana William's name.

There was no answer, so she looked into Miss Indie's bedroom just off the back hall on the first floor and found everything in order there. A round table in the middle of the room had her writing materials and some papers that she had been working on. The bed covers were smooth, so she had not taken a nap. The door to the adjoining room, which had been Indiana's daughter, Daisy's, bedroom, was ajar. This door was usually kept tightly closed. Mrs. Farrar looked in. She found Miss Indie on the floor at the foot of Daisy's bed. The perpetual sadness on her face had been erased in the peace of eternal sleep.



I

Indiana Fletcher Williams was old, she was tired, and she was very ill. As long as she still had the breath of life she would work to make the only thing she had left to live for, her dream of a school in memory of her only child, Daisy, come to fruition. She had done everything possible to make her will attack-proof. Did she not hire the most astute estate lawyer she could find in New York, Mr. Eugene Smith? She had planned out her will and he had drawn it to her specifications and to the rigid codes for the states of New York and Virginia.

Mr. Smith based the will on a similar will that had been drawn up for the late governor of New York, Samuel J. Tilden. Governor Tilden's will had been viciously attacked and contested in the highest courts of New York, and in the end did not hold its validity. However, as each legal objection was rendered, the court suggested ways to have the objection overruled. Taking similar objections into account for a possible attack on the Williams' will, Mr. Smith circumvented every pitfall that could invalidate his client's will.

To further insure the safety of the will, Mr. Smith thought it necessary to make certain that it met the codes of the Virginia courts. He contacted Mr. Robert Stiles, an eminent estate lawyer in Richmond who, following directions from the Honorable E. C. Burks, judge of the highest Court of Appeals in Virginia, made minor changes to fit the Virginia codes. Satisfied that the will was now tamperproof and with all the loopholes closed, the will was signed by Indiana Fletcher Williams in New York on April 22, 1899. The only thing left to do, she believed, was to pray that the will would weather any attacks against it that might be forthcoming.

If there was one thing that Indiana Fletcher Williams knew how to do, it was to plan ahead. She considered herself only the caretaker of a very sizable fortune and estate. Now, she was at the end of her line, and she wanted the estate put to the best possible and constructive use.



She confided her fears to her friend of long standing, Elizabeth Payne, in Amherst, that she was frightened that "there are those who would try to destroy my will." However, it held firm through months of wrangling on the part of many lawyers, the state of Virginia, the county of Amherst, and a law suit brought by her brother Lucian's remaining five children. They considered their aunt's estate their rightful inheritance, as much of it had originally been amassed by their grandfather, Elijah Fletcher.

But Indiana had never recognized these nieces and nephews as members of her family. Of Lucian's seven children, six were born out of wedlock. About the time of Daisy Williams' death, a circuit-riding Methodist minister convinced Lucian that, if he married the mother of his children, they would be legitimized and would then have the opportunity of contesting their aunt's will for a share in her estate as the next of kin.

Lucian had been anathema to his family from his earliest youth, and had been disowned by his father while still in his mid-twenties. His transgressions against his family and the local citizenry were well-known. He was described by one retired local sheriff, Captain Edgar Whitehead, during court hearings in 1901 as "the worst outlaw in the history of the county." Before Lucian's death in 1895, he had amassed a long police file that included charges of alcohol abuse, child abuse, armed assault, disturbing the peace, blackmail, and murder. He had shamed his family beyond endurance. He had been acquitted of the murder charge, but carried the pardon on his person for the next fifty years. His family never forgave him. If they had, perhaps the history of Sweet Briar would have taken a far different course.

Lawyers for Lucian's children tried to break the will on the ground that Indiana's "insane aversion" to her nieces and nephew constituted a mentally unbalanced mind. A mind that, in essence, could not possibly have constructed such a will as she had prepared, that the will was a possible fake, and they attempted to prove it.



The lawyers played heavily, during hearings, on the word "insane." It was the main thrust of their case.

It was made patently clear in several depositions that Indiana detested and feared Lucian to the point that she refused him entry into Sweet Briar House. It was testified that she went so far as to place angle irons on the inside of her doors leading into the yard into which she dropped heavy boards to keep Lucian from breaking into the house. On several occasions, Lucian had threatened to kill Indiana if she did not meet his demands for money. She refused to have any contact with Lucian's children. She did not have "an insane aversion" to them, she simply refused to admit their existence. Her servants had orders to keep them off the property, and Mr. Charles Tinsley, who owned the livery stable in Amherst, testified that he was requested not to rent his carriages to them if they intended to ride to Sweet Briar. Indiana said she would pay him for any loss of revenue if he refused to rent to any of them.

Indiana believed that if Lucian never measured up to family expectations, then his children would not either. She believed that the mother of the children was of no moral character, and the product of a dissolute county family. The children's mother was referred to throughout the court hearings as "that white mountain woman." No name was given to her in over a thousand pages of testimony and depositions.



Sweet Briar House



II

Indiana was the personification of Victorian womanhood. She was high-minded, pious, and very correct in all of her actions and attitudes. She was described as somewhat reticent, a brilliant conversationalist, well-read and extremely bright. Among those giving depositions, there were several from the local community who believed that Indiana was reclusive as she did not participate actively in the life of either the town or county. They felt she was penurious, drove hard bargains and “tried to act as tho’ poor.” Not one person testified that she showed any sign of mental instability or insanity.

Several things must be taken into consideration concerning Indiana’s reticence toward her Amherst neighbors: She was born, raised, and schooled in Lynchburg. Her Sweet Briar plantation had been used by the family only as a summer home in her formative years. Her schooling was continued after Lynchburg years at Georgetown Visitation Convent in Washington, D.C., and following that, she continued her studies at St. Mary’s Hall, also called Bishop Doane’s School, in Burlington, New Jersey. She sought further studies in language and music in Philadelphia.

At the age of sixteen, in 1844, Indiana, her oldest brother Sidney, and her sister Elizabeth spent two years abroad travelling extensively throughout Europe and the Holy Lands. This grand tour was designed by their father to polish these three of his children who measured up, into well-rounded, cultured, and knowledgeable citizens of the world.

After her return from Europe, Indiana and her sister both spent much time at Sweet Briar with their father, but an equal amount of time in Lynchburg at their city home. They traveled, visited and were not actively involved in the running of the plantation. They were young, indulged, and their social life in Lynchburg took precedence over any active involvement with their Amherst County neighbors. It was not until many years later when Indiana lived alone on the Sweet Briar plantation that she had direct contact with





people in the county. The Civil War years saw her, as a young woman, running the plantation with a large number of slaves, an overseer, help from her brother Sidney, and the companionship of her sister Elizabeth and Elizabeth's new husband, William Hamilton Mosby, of Lynchburg and Louisa County. Immediately following the war, Indiana married the Rev. James Henry Williams and moved to New York. She spent little time on the plantation thereafter until she was widowed and getting old.

With the exception of a small handful of people, Indiana felt she had nothing in common with the general populace of Amherst County, and indeed, she did not. Her reclusiveness was not intentional; it was merely that as she grew older and had lived through much personal tragedy, she was not interested in socializing with people she scarcely knew, whose lives were far removed from her own, whose interests and backgrounds were alien to her. During her last year, when she was quite ill, she refused to see anyone other than her few close friends, and she turned down visits to her home from strangers and mere acquaintances.

She remained close to her brother Sidney and sister Elizabeth until their deaths, her friends John and Elizabeth Payne in Amherst – with whom she had wintered on four occasions – as well as their children. She depended on her physician, Dr. Voorhees, and his wife, and her pastor, Dr. Arthur Gray of Ascension Episcopal Church in Amherst, and Mrs. Gray, who were close friends whom she visited frequently. Mr. Steven Harding was a local business associate whom she trusted and depended on for many things in connection with her properties and who became executor of her estate. There were few others who were close to her in and around Sweet Briar. She went to New York as often as her health permitted in her final years, but Sweet Briar remained a lonely place for her in the 1890s.

In these later years, Indiana had few servants about her Virginia property, a far cry from the pre-Civil War days when the Fletcher family was listed in the census as having 67 slave families, a total of



115 people. These people were not all located on the Sweet Briar plantation, but were scattered over the many Fletcher properties in the area.

Indiana retained an overseer, Logan Anderson, who hired labor as needed to maintain the plantation, and her old servant of many years, Martha Penn Taylor, always came over to Sweet Briar from her home in Coolwell when Indiana was in residence. Taylor had been a slave purchased by Elijah Fletcher, at her own request in 1853. Elijah owned her sister Mary, and as Elijah was deemed a good master, Martha begged him to buy her, "or I shall be shipped to the south." Martha's letter to Elijah, in the Sweet Briar Museum, is one of Sweet Briar's treasures.

Indiana generally hired a cook/house servant who lived nearby. Her last one was Robert Rucker, a grandson of a Fletcher slave. He gave much interesting information during the court hearings as to her mental stability in those last days as well as an account of her general health. He found nothing wrong with her mind nor anything odd about Indiana at all. He considered her a good, kind, and generous employer, but was distressed over her physical frailty in her last months. He said that he thought she tried to do too much physically for a woman in her weakened condition. He firmly denied that she had any mental aberrations.

On one occasion, as Rucker was churning butter in the cellar kitchen under the dining room of the house, Indiana was standing near him when she had a "sinking spell" and fell to the floor in a faint. Rucker carried her upstairs to her first floor east bedroom and placed her on a couch. "When she come to after about an hour, the first thing she said was, "Oh, it's nearly dinner time. I must get up and prepare your meal." He refused her help and told her that there was plenty of food already prepared that would feed them both. He made her rest until she was feeling stronger. Then he added, "but she still got up and gave me a slug of cake, preserves, and milk."



Indiana was suffering circulatory problems and was having a series of small strokes. She had had one such attack at the Payne home in Amherst and it had affected her speech. She asked Elizabeth Payne, "Whatever is happening to me?" Elizabeth Payne answered, "You have a premonitory of paralysis." This was later verified by Indiana's New York physician.



III

In the 1890s, life was much as it had been at Sweet Briar following the Civil War. The plantation was isolated, there was no running water, no electricity, no heat, and no transportation other than horse and carriage. There were some farm animals, and crops were planted seasonally for the market by hired hands, the fruit trees still bore, and a kitchen garden yielded the necessary vegetables in the summer months. Indiana had gone into the cattle-raising business in 1897 with Steven Harding but told the Paynes that except for the profit, she disliked the business intensely. In spite of the farm schedule and those hired to oversee the operations, Indiana felt very much isolated and her last years were lonely.

Signora Smith Hollins, who had been brought to Sweet Briar plantation as a playmate for Daisy Williams in the early 1870s by her Aunt Rose, the Williams' cook, reminisced in 1951 about the post-Civil War plantation "The house was surrounded by forest, heavy forest. There was an iron fence all around the yard and one gate went out to the road. A big mean guard dog was tied to the fence post to keep strangers out. When someone came the dog had to be moved." She continued, "There were lots of big box bushes in the yard where we girls played house, and a pond in the little valley in front of the house where we pretended to fish." Ice was cut from this pond in winter to store in the ice house for summer use.

The road that Signora mentioned was the old plantation wagon road that wound down into the present day college hunt field and pasture. It twined through the present day lake bed, wound its way up the hill and joined Waugh's Ferry Road and on to Amherst. Traces of the road may still be found running for several hundred yards behind the last remaining slave cabin on the property.

The small house next door to and in the shadow of Sweet Briar House in earlier days was the two-room plantation office. In the 1840s Sidney Fletcher used it as a medical office, but later one room



was kept for transient help such as the man who came to shear sheep each year. Later, Indiana used it for rental property. It was the cottage tenant in 1900, Mrs. Camilla Farrar, who discovered Indiana's lifeless body at the foot of Daisy's bed in the room used today as the President's dining room.

After Indiana was widowed in 1889 she did not operate her plantation full volume, nevertheless she never sold any of her lands. Her real estate holdings increased markedly when her sister Elizabeth died in 1890 and brother Sidney in 1898. Neither had children. Sidney's plantation, Tusculum, seven miles north of Sweet Briar, was left to a cousin, John J. Williams, but all of his other properties went to Indiana. Elizabeth Mosby's Mt. San Angelo and her other properties in Virginia and West Virginia also came back to Indiana. In her last years, Indiana found herself collecting rents on 23 local farms. Nevertheless she managed her lands and investments with shrewdness until her death. She took her bookkeeping seriously — after all, she excelled in the subject in her days at the Georgetown Visitation Convent, where she received a ticket of merit in Bookkeeping.

In one of his depositions at the court hearings in 1900, Captain Edgar Whitehead, not only a retired sheriff of Amherst County, but also the local tobacco agent for many years, told a story about Indiana as one example of her business acumen.

One day shortly after the Civil War broke out, Indiana invited Captain Whitehead to come over to Sweet Briar on a matter of business. Upon his arrival, Indiana told him that she had a substantial amount of cash in Confederate notes — “a whole barrel full,” Whitehead said. She indicated that she wanted to put the money — “all of it” — into leaf tobacco. Whitehead said that he would gladly handle the transactions for her. Indiana divested herself of the bulk of her southern money early in the war, holding out just enough for running expenses, reinvested in northern securities and tobacco, waited until the war was over and cashed it all in for “good Yankee



gold." "She made an enormous profit on her tobacco," Captain Whitehead said. Indiana and her brother Sidney were firm believers in the strength of the north; their views were more northern than southern. Indiana did not espouse her political views, but her actions spoke for themselves. Sidney, however, became a Republican after the war, and according to Captain Whitehead, his neighbors never forgave him!

No one knew the extent of Indiana's estate until after her death, with the exception of her New York attorney, and she volunteered no information as to her intentions for distribution of her estate, but like a quiet little spider diligently weaving its intricate web, she saved, harbored, and carefully invested every cent for her future school. She was well aware of local curiosity and gossip, but she did not reveal her plans. When her will was read and put into motion, she had created a local furor. Her estate was worth \$750,000 in 1900; today it would be worth millions. She had the intelligence and foresight to predict local reactions, but her will stood like a rock against the storm that buffeted it. When the storm was over, her dream was realized and Sweet Briar Plantation became Sweet Briar College.



Maria Fletcher



Elijah Fletcher



IV

It must have been with considerable pride that Elijah Fletcher and his wife, Maria Antoinette Crawford Fletcher, gazed down at their newborn twins on that March day in 1828 when they were born. It was wonderful that one was a little girl. She could never replace their beautiful little Laura, dead for two years, but considering that this baby's twin was another boy, the new baby girl was very welcome. The Fletchers had two sons, Sidney, age seven, and Lucian, age four, who were described by their father as "lively and healthy little boys."

Before the year was over, the infant twin boy died, but his sister survived to become the light of her father's life. It took a long time for the Fletchers to find a name for the child, so long after she was walking she remained "Puss" to the family. At last the name of "Indiana" was selected, possibly in deference to the fact that Elijah's favorite brother Calvin, was a founder of Indianapolis, Indiana. Elijah and Calvin were kindred spirits, and conducted much business together in their two adopted states of Indiana and Virginia. Their correspondence was long and frequent, and they were great admirers of each other. Both were astute businessmen, highly moral, strong family men, and in spite of a nine year difference in age (Elijah being the elder) they could have been twins.

Indiana was not destined to be the only girl, as the last Fletcher child, born in 1830, was also a girl, Elizabeth. The sisters were to share much love, but also trials and tribulations. They remained close until separated by death sixty years later.

While growing into womanhood, Indiana admired her father more than anyone else. Very early she fell under his influence and tried to emulate him in all things. Her father was a bright, strong-minded, just, determined, educated, and ambitious man, but his early background was marginal at best. One of fifteen children of a poor Ludlow, Vermont, farming family, Elijah learned the work ethic early. He realized at a young age that education was the only way out



Indiana Fletcher — c. 1845



of a poverty-plagued background. He went from the village school in Ludlow to Middlebury College at age sixteen and worked his way through. By his final year, he saw that education was to be his future, so he transferred to the nearby University of Vermont where he earned a teaching degree. Middlebury did not offer one. The field of education was thereafter of lifelong interest to Elijah. He was eventually enormously successful in business, publishing, farming, investing, and land speculation, and he saw to it that his four children had the best educations that he could provide for them in their formative years.

Elijah's two sons were both graduates of Yale University. Sidney later became a medical doctor; Lucian a lawyer. Indiana and Elizabeth both graduated from Georgetown Visitation Convent in Washington, D.C. with honors. Elijah called it the "nunnery," but it was considered the best school for girls in the east in the 1840s. The Fletchers were not Catholic, but they placed education above formal religion. They were staunch Episcopalians and supported their churches of St. Paul's in Lynchburg and Ascension in Amherst.

Indiana was not happy at the convent school, but she studied hard and years later she told Elizabeth Payne, "The Catholics tried to proselyte me but they failed. I did not like their ways, and I oppose their methods."

The nuns were especially strict at Georgetown, and Indiana's small rebellions caused her extra hardship, work and some demerits. For quite some time after she entered the school in 1840, she was grievously homesick and wrote home complaining and miserable. Her father's answer from Lynchburg was, "You have greater opportunities than you could possibly have here and you know how anxious your brothers are that you should be a learned and accomplished lady. Cheer up and do not despond. Commence your studies in good earnest and at the end of six months, if you say that you are not satisfied, I will come and see you." She obviously settled down so as not to disappoint her father.



Indiana's most serious infraction in the eyes of the nuns was the use of the Episcopal Prayer Book rather than the Catholic. She was discovered using her own book at service. The nuns felt this tantamount to insurrection. Indiana survived to graduate with honors. Her grades are still on file at Georgetown University as well as her courses of study.

It is recorded that she took courses in history, botany, chemistry, philosophy, mathematics, astronomy, French, Latin, English composition and grammar, as well as harp, oil painting, and tapestry. Her Ticket of Merit in Bookkeeping undoubtedly served her well in later years as her bookkeeping and records of financial transactions were in excellent shape before her death.

At this period in 19th-century America, when the majority of women received little or no education, this background would have set Indiana apart from most of her female contemporaries as well as male. This is no doubt the reason that she "loved New York above all places," a statement that she made in writing to her friend Elizabeth Payne in 1898. She had many intellectually stimulating contacts there.

Indiana and her sister Elizabeth spent several winters with the Kirkland family in New York before the Civil War. The family was the center of a prominent literary circle. Caroline M. Stansbury Kirkland was an authoress of some renown in her day, and her home was the gathering place for the New York literati. Mrs. Kirkland's two daughters became good friends of the Fletcher sisters. During the Civil War, Indiana managed to get letters through the lines to Elizabeth "Lizzie" Kirkland, Caroline's daughter in Danville, Illinois. Letters were sent through the lines under flags of truce, and it was in this manner that Indiana was also able to stay in touch with her uncle Calvin Fletcher in Indianapolis.

The grand tour to Europe and the Holy lands in the 1840s had a long-lasting effect on Indiana's life. According to Elijah Fletcher after his children's first trip to Europe in 1844-46, "they came back much refined" and he added, "they are now also 'wine bibbers.'"



In the 1900 inventory of Sweet Briar House, it was written that there was a fully stocked wine cellar with hundreds of bottles of fine wine. There was no mention of their disposition. As there has never been any mention of viviculture on the Sweet Briar plantation, it is presumed that Indiana stocked the cellar with imported wine. At one time Elijah Fletcher did contemplate planting wine grapes on the south side of his burial hill at Sweet Briar but no evidence that he did so has come to light.

The Sweet Briar House is another reflection of Indiana and her sister's developing tastes in the 1850s. The house, on the National Register of Historic Places and a Virginia Historic Landmark, is perhaps the finest country Tuscan villa in Virginia. Originally the house was a sturdy but simple Federal style building of brick with an interior arrangement of three rooms over three with a central entrance hall and an upstairs hall. There was a two-story porch on the facade. Typical of many Virginia farm houses of the late 18th century and early 19th century, it probably had a shake shingle roof. From a beguiling but rather primitive watercolor sketch of the house in 1825, the exterior trim was white, the brick was unpainted, and there were green shutters on each window. This original and charming house was transformed into the present elegant villa starting in 1851, several years after the Fletcher children returned from Europe.

The first Tuscan style villa to be built in the United States was that of Bishop Doane in Burlington, New Jersey. Doane's villa was built in the mid-1830s, just a few years before Indiana arrived at his school to continue her studies in the early 1840s. Photos of the house, now razed, indicate quite a grand edifice. It probably made a lasting impression on the young Indiana. Her trip abroad, which included many months in Italy, undoubtedly reinforced her tastes in the Italian styles.

It is interesting to note that, when Elizabeth married William Hamilton Mosby and later built her house at Mt. San Angelo, she



too elected to build in the Tuscan style. The original house across the road from Sweet Briar was built in the shape of a "T" with a central four-story tower. All of the windows were arched in the Roman style and the gardens were laid out in the formal arrangement dear to the hearts of 17th and 18th century Italians, complete with marble statuary, sunken areas, exotic trees and shrubs and extraordinary box hedges.

Before renovations began on Sweet Briar house, Elijah and his daughters decided to make the Sweet Briar plantation their year-round home. Mrs. Fletcher preferred city life in Lynchburg, so the family establishment overlooking the James River was maintained for her with a staff of servants. There was much traveling back and forth by family members. When Indiana and Elizabeth traveled to stay in town with their mother, they went in the Fletcher coach pulled by four white horses. Their servants traveled with them surrounded by piles of luggage over exceedingly bad roads.

In a letter from Elijah to his brother Calvin in Indianapolis dated May 1847 Elijah told him, "Inda and Bettie spend much of their time with me here and seem quite reconciled to retirement and enjoy themselves and spend their time in reading and writing and sewing and music. They have a very fine piano and splendid harp that they purchased in London. They are likewise fond of rambling and riding about with me among the mountains."

During those years, Indiana and Elizabeth also traveled in other directions. They went to New York, Boston, Philadelphia and took a trip to the West Indies with their brother Sidney. They stayed in Havana for some time. From Cuba they went to New Orleans and up the Mississippi by steamer to the Ohio River and on to Indianapolis and Louisville to visit relatives. They spent considerable time in Lynchburg with their mother and their city friends, so they were not entirely isolated in the country for months on end.

Although the Fletcher children's grandparents in New England were dead by the late 1840s, the girls and their brother Sidney still



traveled to Ludlow, Vermont, to visit aunts, uncles, and numerous cousins. They had several extended visits and became very fond of New England and life in the north. They felt close to their northern relatives and carried on correspondence with some of them for many years.

The old Vermont farmhouse was a large, rambling white clapboard structure that was referred to by family members as the "mansion." It is still standing today, although the last Fletcher to live in the house, Fanny Fletcher, a granddaughter of Elijah's brother Stoughton, sold the property in the 1950s. Many antiques in the Sweet Briar collection came from the farm when Fanny Fletcher sold it.

Nothing has been said of Indiana's southern grandparents, the Crawfords of Tusculum. The first Crawfords came from Scotland in the mid-17th century. John Crawford and his son David immigrated to the Tidewater area of Virginia. John was killed during the battle of Bacon's Rebellion in 1676. David went into business importing colonists from the British Isles for which he received land grants from the Crown. His first 49 acres were awarded to him in Martin's Hundred near Williamsburg. In the ensuing years he amassed several thousand acres. He eventually settled in New Kent County, now Hanover County at the confluence of the North and South Anna Rivers where they form the Pamunkey River.

David's son, David II, also known as Captain David Crawford, became a frontiersman. After learning that the land to the west was very fertile and the climate salubrious, Captain David moved to the land now known as Tusculum, in Amherst County. He and his wife Elizabeth were well into their seventies when they made the move. They cleared 500 acres and built a home which still stands. Captain David and Elizabeth lived to be 100 and 101 years old respectively. They lived for so long that they left their property to their great-grandson, William Sidney Crawford, Indiana's grandfather.



William Sidney, a Princeton graduate, lawyer and clerk of the Amherst County courts for many years, was considered a distinguished member of the community. As well as being a lawyer, he was also a fairly successful planter. He and his wife, Sophia Penn, had eleven children. Their daughter, Maria Antoinette Crawford, became the wife of Elijah Fletcher in 1813.

Immediately upon the marriage in 1813, Elijah was made executor of his father-in-law's estate. Within two years, William Sidney died. He left his plantation and other lands to his nine surviving children and his wife, equally divided. Unfortunately, their management of the land was not too successful, which Elijah found distressing. Elijah, a born farmer, began buying out his wife's siblings in 1827. By 1835 he was sole owner of the property. It was the Fletcher family who gave the plantation the name "Tusculum," after the ancient summer resort town near Rome, home to Roman emperors Pliny, Titus, Cicero, and others.

Elijah brought the land back into full and profitable production and in 1850 gave it to his son Sidney as his inheritance. Mrs. Crawford moved with her son, William Sidney Jr. to Louisville, Kentucky, where she lived out her years. The other family members had already dispersed to other areas, so the Fletcher children apparently were not as close to their Crawford relatives as they were to their Fletcher family in New England.

It was at Tusculum, while visiting Sidney, that Maria Fletcher died in September of 1853. She was 61 years old and had contracted a fever, possibly typhoid, and she lingered for only 10 days. She is buried at Tusculum with her father and two sons, Sidney and Lucian. Her death devastated Indiana to the point that she could not talk about it, according to a letter from her Aunt Lucy Fletcher Williams to Calvin Fletcher in Indiana.

Sidney loved his land, and his sisters were frequent visitors. The trip to Tusculum from Sweet Briar was a distance of about seven miles over unpaved, rough, and potholed roads. It was a long morning or afternoon's drive by carriage and more comfortable by



horseback. Notwithstanding the travel inconvenience, the traffic between the two plantations was fairly constant.

There was much to maintain on Sidney's lands. Although Tusculum was a parcel of 500 acres, he actually owned thousands of acres of Amherst County land. A bill issued to Sidney during 1863 by the Confederate States levied him for \$800 on his 16,000 acres.

Both Sweet Briar and Tusculum were self-sustaining plantations. Their principal crops were corn, wheat, hay, clover, oats, and some tobacco. The Fletchers felt that tobacco leached the soil of its nutrients and ruined the land, so they were not interested in tobacco as a major cash crop.

There were orchards of apples, peaches, plums, cherries, and pears and many black and English walnut trees. Their gardens produced vegetables and assorted types of berries. They raised cattle, hogs, sheep, and fowl, both for home consumption as well as for the market. The Fletchers needed vast amounts of food for the army of slaves they supported before the Civil War. In one of Elijah's letters to his brother Calvin, he told of slaughtering more than one hundred hogs each fall for plantation consumption.

Slave families had their own garden plots to help sustain them, and in the case of the Fletchers, certain fields of corn were set aside for the slaves to cultivate. They were able to reap the profits from sales for themselves. In December 1855 Elijah wrote to brother Calvin in Indianapolis:

"We are not doing much except preparing for a happy Christmas for our servants. They have all to sell their crops, which consist principally of corn, and it takes many wagon loads and each wants to go with it and lay in their finery and small comforts. Your friends, many of them, would be surprised to see their return cargoes, many of the women with fine black silk dresses, costing from \$10 to \$15, and some nice thing for every child. It gives me much pleasure to aid in all these things to make them comfortable. Those that have had bad luck with their crops or been improvident are assisted by MASTER. None fear they will suffer or have any little want which will not be gratified."



Indiana Fletcher - c. 1853



V

During the 1850s, except for the death of her mother, Indiana lived a rather spoiled, self-centered existence. At least by today's standards she seemed to have no other object in view but self-gratification. She came and went as she pleased with all of the funds she needed supplied by a generous, loving, and indulgent father. It was probably at this time that Indiana had a love affair with a seafaring man named John Collins. He was a nephew of Mr. and Mrs. Dabney, who lived across from the Fletcher home in Lynchburg. Their engagement was announced, but no date was set for the wedding as John had to sail to Europe. On his return voyage he was stricken with smallpox, and several days after the ship docked in New York, John succumbed to the disease. In her despair, Indiana had a portrait of John copied from one owned by the Dabneys.

Indiana took many trips to the north east for shopping and cultural pursuits. It appeared from her father's letters that she was able to purchase whatever pleased her. One bill in the Sweet Briar archives was from a Boston jeweler for more than \$1,000 for silver hollowware designed to her specifications. This, at a time when the average county laborer earned less than \$300 per annum. Indiana helped supervise the remodeling of the plantation house, but spent as many weekends in Lynchburg as possible as she preferred Sunday services at St. Paul's to any other church. When at Sweet Briar, she practiced her harp and piano as much as seven hours a day. She read a great deal, and as her father subscribed to many newspapers and journals she was well versed in national and international affairs. Her friend Elizabeth Payne many years later said that she was an excellent conversationalist and was always very knowledgeable of things transpiring worldwide.

Indiana and her father were quite accustomed to reading to each other daily and then discussing the material. This was what they were doing on the morning of March 15, 1858, when Elijah Fletcher took an "unusual long breath" and died in his daughter's arms. He



seemed to be in no pain at the time of his death according to Indiana, so he probably succumbed to a heart arrest.

Indiana at this time was nearly thirty years old, and her father's death marked a major, albeit tragic, turning point in her life. In a letter to her Uncle Calvin two days after Elijah's death, Indiana wrote:

"It has cost me many tears to write this, although my thoughts dwell ever in the past, treasuring up the wise council, wishes, and noble examples of a beloved father. I feel privileged and blessed to have been near him on his last days on earth, and alas! If it must have been to have received his last mute adieu! But when I look around and view this lovely home, these fields and groves so loved and cared for by him, where I have dwelt so many years, happy alone in his loved companionship, to think that every morrow will bring but grief and absence before me require a fortitude which does not come to me, the magnitude of a loss too difficult to realize, and I only pray, that resignation may be sent to me."

Indiana felt totally bereft, and when her sister Elizabeth married William Hamilton Mosby of Lynchburg the following year and eventually moved away, she was quite alone at Sweet Briar.

The first thing she prepared to do was to sell the Sweet Briar plantation and the townhouse in Lynchburg. What her plans were for housing herself are unclear but she did succeed in selling the Lynchburg property. When she advertised "The Estate of the late Elijah Fletcher Esq. For Sale" in the Lynchburg paper of January 6, 1860, the Civil War was looming on the horizon and no interest was shown in a large central Virginia plantation. A scant eleven months later, South Carolina seceded from the Union, and within five weeks the rest of the southern states followed.

Indiana was obliged to spend the next four years managing the plantation alone, as best she could. She had able assistance from her brother Sidney, who did not rush off to the conflict. Sidney was past forty years of age and remained at Tusculum.



There is little information to tell of her experiences on the plantation during this period. It is known that she was financially able to weather the storm, and the plantation undoubtedly functioned much as it had in preceding years. She had adequate slave labor, and she hired an overseer, but her travels north were halted and toward the end of hostilities she gave food, shelter, and sanctuary to several of her Lynchburg women friends and their children, when Lynchburg came under attack. Luxury goods disappeared with the blockading of southern ports, by Union forces and many of life's necessities were hard to come by or had disappeared completely. One of the first things to go was metal coinage; another was coffee and tea, dress fabrics and buttons. Although Sweet Briar was not raided, the war came as close as eight miles distant with action on the Tye River in Amherst County. Federal raiders were driven away by General Jubal Early and a railroad bridge was saved. Union General Sheridan's cavalry was in action in the southern part of the county about fifteen miles away, but Sweet Briar was safe. The war ground to a halt just across the James River in Appomattox.

The weeks following the war were disorganized and hectic. The owners of large farms and plantations had difficulty in defining their new roles. Their previously free labor now demanded wages at a time when southern money was worthless. Sweet Briar Plantation, although no information is directly available as to conditions immediately after the cease-fire, undoubtedly faced the same problems as its neighbors. Many former slaves stayed on the plantations, especially the elderly and children. They didn't know where to go and didn't know what to do. They were mostly illiterate and untrained, so they continued to be supported by their former owners, causing great hardship for everyone.

Elizabeth Payne, Indiana's friend, kept a journal of those days. The following is a revealing passage about conditions on her family farm near Lynchburg.



"We heard from our men of the surrender of General Lee at Appomattox. We felt then that the struggle was over. Though General Johnson's surrender did not take place until the 26th of April. The country was in the greatest state of unrest and anxiety and we did not know what was coming. The negroes of course were freed, but we did not seem to regard that, but our money was worthless and we had nothing to pay the laborers. My father's negroes as a rule behaved remarkably well, were quiet and respectful but indisposed to work. The railroad which had been destroyed was being rebuilt to Lynchburg and there was demand for laborers, so a good number of my father's men went to work on the railroad leaving their families to be supported by him. My father had offered them a part of the crop if they would work for him but they wanted ready money. We finally induced them to save the wheat crop, or most of it. These same men and their families would have suffered the following winter when the railroad stopped work but for the goodness of my father and mother who fed and clothed them as usual and furnished them houses and fuel."

Indiana persevered and began the reorganization of her personal world into the new order. She did not readvertise the plantation for sale. It is not known whether she had difficulties with the carpet baggers and scalawags who came into Virginia in droves, but she did manage, probably better than others, to keep the plantation operational. Income from her father's many astute northern investments undoubtedly paved the way for her continued operation of Sweet Briar in the first difficult weeks after the Civil War.

In early August of 1865 the Reverend James Henry Williams appeared on the front porch of the Sweet Briar House. Indiana had known him before the war on her visits in the north. After his graduation from General Theological Seminary in New York in 1858, he spent six years as Pastor of Zion Episcopal Church in Dobbs Ferry, New York. This tall redheaded Irishman had come to press his



James Henry Williams — c. 1875



suit for marriage with Indiana with whom he had obviously been enamored with all that long time. Indiana did not procrastinate. On August 23, 1865, they were married at St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Lynchburg. They left immediately following the service for New York City. The wedding took place at 10 o'clock in the morning, so they could catch the only train of the day which left before noon.

James Henry gave up his pastorate, and as partners he and Indiana went into the apartment/hotel business. In later years Indiana told Elizabeth Payne, "He didn't have to work as we didn't need the money, but I am afraid that I ruined an excellent preacher." James Henry did occasionally preach in Amherst and Lynchburg when they came to Virginia. Those who heard him claimed he was a fine and inspirational preacher.

James Henry and Indiana had a fine relationship. They were mature individuals in their late thirties when they were married. Both were shrewd in business and enjoyed the same things. They were cultural enthusiasts and shared a love of music, art, travel and fine things.

In the depositions of 1901 it was revealed that many of the quality things that were inventoried in the Sweet Briar House had been purchased by James Henry. He purchased items that caught his fancy: clocks, pictures, furniture, silver, bronzes, and other luxury items. James Henry was something of an entrepreneur in investments, and had built up a considerable estate of his own. When his will was probated in 1889, it was discovered that he had left his wife more than \$100,000.

It was also noted in the depositions that Sweet Briar House was filled to capacity with furnishings, bric-a-brac, carpets, china, silver, and pictures "so plentiful that one could barely see the walls." Mrs. Payne explained that Indiana was so sentimental that she could not part with anything. Everything had special meaning for her in her loneliness at the end of her life. Lawyers for the nieces and nephew at the hearings tried to use the overabundance of personal



possessions as a form of "greed and mania." They submitted the opinion that only a very unbalanced individual would choose to live in such clutter. Mrs. Payne explained that Indiana's possessions were her security and pleasure and that she had little else in her loneliness to remind her of happier days.

The odd, but huge collection found in the house of hundreds of yards of dress goods, towels, napkins, sheets, pillowslips, stockings, and cutlery were apparently for her future school and its students.



Daisy Williams — c. 1883



VI

When the Williams' only child, Maria Georgiana (Daisy) was born on September 10, 1867, at Sweet Briar, her parents felt blessed. They had both entered mid-life and the joy of a child was great fulfillment.

Daisy, as she grew up, loved Sweet Briar and spent all the summers of her short life on the plantation. Perhaps it was because the Williams did not have a permanent residence in New York that the lovely old house at Sweet Briar was referred to in Daisy's diary as "home." The family rented rooms in various establishments in New York and took their meals out in restaurants or had meals delivered to their rooms. Apparently, they did no cooking.

This New York lifestyle probably gave Daisy a feeling of impermanence in the city, and Sweet Briar was always there waiting for her. In her writings, one has the feeling of "my house, my garden, my room, my trees." Her parents introduced her to the things they loved, especially the musical offerings from recitals to opera. Her education was in private schools, and she was tutored in piano and harp. Wherever Daisy went, the harp went with her. It was of course, Indiana's harp that had been purchased in London in 1845. The instrument traveled back and forth between New York and Sweet Briar many times, and after Daisy's death in New York, it came back on the same train as the child's remains to Sweet Briar. It was shrouded, never to be played again. Indiana had an embroidered cover made especially for the harp that Mrs. Payne described as "magnificent."

Daisy was a fragile child who, unknown to her parents, was doomed to an early death. She was probably condemned by a genetic defect inherited from her father that caused an erosion of the lungs not unlike emphysema. The disease, xlantitrypsin deficiency, researched in recent years by genetic biologists, is known to strike in youth and middle age. It is always fatal and never skips a generation.



Daisy led a blameless life. Everything centered on her Mama and Papa and her life within the family. That Mama and Papa doted on Daisy and that their life revolved around their child was made patently clear by Indiana's emotional breakdown when Daisy died in New York on January 22nd, 1884.

Signora Hollins, Martha Penn Taylor, and a servant named Sam stayed with Indiana after Daisy's burial at Sweet Briar. They were very worried that "she wouldn't come 'round to herself." The terrible grief and anguish following Daisy's illness from October 1883 until her death had taken a toll on Indiana's own health. To Indiana, Daisy was just away for awhile. Nothing would be touched. Daisy's room would remain the same. The piano was locked, the harp shrouded, but her clothes remained in her armoire and fresh sheets were kept on Daisy's bed.

Signora said that Indiana insisted that she and Sam take Daisy's breakfast to her graveside on the monument hill each morning and "we had to stay for one half hour." They also had to lead Daisy's pony, Bounce, to the gravesite completely tacked and with Daisy's riding skirt across the pommel of the saddle.

Later each day, Indiana made the trek to the grave herself, and if any mail had come that would be of interest to Daisy, Indiana read it aloud while sitting beside the grave marker. Signora said that this went on for about six months, "then she come 'round to herself." Indiana returned to New York during the summer of 1884.

Five years passed, during which time Indiana and James Henry conducted their business, traveled abroad, and made at least two trips each year to Sweet Briar to oversee their property. But James Henry's health was precarious, and in 1889, at the age of 56, he too died and was laid to rest beside his daughter on the Monument Hill at Sweet Briar.

James Henry had died of cirrhosis of the liver, which is the alternate form of the disease that killed Daisy. James Henry was brought to America by his mother along with his two sisters from



Port Ferry, Ireland, in the early 1830s. His mother was a young widow, so it is assumed that her husband had already fallen victim to the same disease that afflicted his son and granddaughter. It would seem an unfortunate family curse.

Indiana, now in her early sixties, believed she had to divest herself of her New York properties. She and James Henry had owned apartment hotels, completely furnished and one with dining facilities. Getting adequate help was always a problem, but between James Henry and Indiana they had managed. With James Henry gone, Indiana had to unburden herself of the responsibility. When her properties were sold, she began making investments. Some were very long term, which makes one believe she was planning even then to prepare her estate for the founding of an educational institution. Some bonds that she purchased were not to come due until the 1980s, 1990s and one is not due until June 1, 2000. She was far-sighted and planned well in advance for her dream.

A century ago, railroads were in their heyday. She invested heavily in these as well as in banks and gas companies. She had an enormous amount of land in Virginia and West Virginia as well as some prime building sites in Diamond Hill in Lynchburg where the carriage trade flourished. Rents on her 23 farms in Amherst County provided income. For an astute investor who was thrifty in the days of no federal income tax, fortunes could be made.

After her family was gone, Indiana no longer purchased things for her home. She already had more furniture than she needed. Following Daisy's death, she changed nothing in her house, so today Sweet Briar's antiques all predate the 1880 period.

Indiana had always been fashion-conscious in home furnishings and clothing. When the Sweet Briar House was remodeled in 1851, the furnishings selected by Indiana and her sister were the height of fashion. No antiques for the modern Fletcher sisters! They also bought quality pieces with no expense spared. The fact that the furniture has survived is a testament to that quality.



Indiana's clothing, some of which has survived, can be dated according to its style. Sweet Briar has examples of her clothes from 1845 to 1895. Everything is made of excellent fabric, beautifully hand finished and with great attention to design and trim. Her laces are exquisite. Many of her dresses are black. She had spent years of her life in mourning, but the styles were up-to-date even though the color is funereal.

From her clothing, we have some idea of Indiana's size. Daisy's diary was somewhat misleading when she stated her "Mama weighs 182 pounds and Papa 137." They weighed themselves on the baggage scales at McIvor's rail station, now Monroe, Virginia. If Indiana was fully clothed when she stepped on the scales, the 182 pounds is possible considering the heavy faille or worsted travel dresses, bustles, five petticoats, corsets, chemise, shoes, heavy stockings, coat, pocketbook, furs, jewelry, gloves and hat.

Indiana was tall for a woman of her day. She stood 5'7" and weighed between 135 and 140 pounds. Her waist measurement, even in her later years, was never more than 25". When she was a teenager it was 19" so she was never a heavy person. Also, no great weight is indicated in any of her surviving photos which cover the years from about sixteen years of age to fifty.

In coloring, she was fair. Her hair was a bit darker than ash blonde. Indiana had saved snips of Daisy's curls, and since Daisy favored her mother in coloring, Indiana's hair was similar to Daisy's in shade, according to Signora Hollins. Charlie Morris, who had worked for Indiana as a very young man, said, "her eyes were bluer than the sky." He added that "she war high." He also had worked for her sister Elizabeth at Mt. San Angelo and he said that "she war low." For many years the rumor abounded at Sweet Briar that one sister was tall and the other short, but until Charlie Morris came forth with his information no one was certain which was which because until the 1980s no portraits of the sisters had ever been identified.



The Crawford genealogy, to be found in the Sweet Briar Library, indicates that the Crawford family characteristics were blue eyes, tall frames, and strong builds. Indiana probably inherited her height and coloring from her Crawford line.

The years after Daisy's death were trying. In 1890, Indiana buried her younger sister Elizabeth on the Monument Hill. Several years before her death, Elizabeth had had a falling-out with her husband. A dispute had arisen over some of Elizabeth's lands, and her husband left. Indiana did not include the name of Mosby on her sister's tomb stone. It simply reads "Elizabeth, daughter of Elijah and Maria Antoinette Fletcher."

In 1895, her brother Lucian died, and Indiana let Sidney handle his burial at Tusculum. Sidney had Lucian's remains placed in a far corner of the little burying ground surrounded by an iron fence on his farm. He was placed as far away from other family members as the encircling fence would allow. He was, even in death, ostracized by his family.

Sidney died in 1898, leaving Indiana as his executrix. He too was buried at Tusculum, beside his mother and grandfather Crawford. Indiana, although far from well, took over many of Sidney's landholdings which were now to be included in her own estate.

She spent the next eighteen months getting all of her own affairs in order. A trip to New York in the spring of 1899 was her last, but it saw the completion and signing of her will. She selected Stephen Harding as her executor, and she continued the managing and investing of her money. She visited sales and bought in bulk quantities those items that she felt would be of use in her school. She renewed rent bonds on her many properties in and near Amherst and made certain that everything was in order before her impending death.

She told Elizabeth Payne precisely how she wanted her funeral arrangements made. When she died on that chilly late October afternoon of 1900, she had tied up all the loose ends. She died alone



and lonely, but certainly satisfied that she had done all she could in the stewardship of the legacy left to her by her family. She had squandered nothing of her responsibility and had actually increased her holdings toward the fulfillment of her dream for her school.

Indiana Fletcher Williams was a remarkable and able woman for her time. It is to her that many thousands of women owe their educations. Sweet Briar's Miss Indie was a credit to her sex, and an admirable role model for all of her graduates.



